“If you don’t stand for something, you will fall for anything.” –Malcolm X

Upon first glance at this confidential information, it is apparent that Malcolm Little is a subject of a Communist Index Card; further along in the FBI file, there is an entire section dedicated to Malcolm’s affiliation with the Communist party’s activities. This released document on former prominent activist, Malcolm Little, better known as Malcolm X, is dated February 17, 1953. During the 1950’s, the Cold War escalated as a result of mutual distrust and enmity between the Soviet Union and the United States; the U.S.’s circumspection has grown since Stalin’s totalitarian rule in World War II. It is evident that frenzy over the menace associated with communism was common in the 1950’s; in fact, it was referred to as the red scare.

The Communist Soviet Union was on the rise and acquiring territory and technology. Therefore, the Red Scare was a rampant force in America around this time. Additionally, African-Americans were discriminated against by whites via segregation, public shaming, and the denial of rights and privileges. Seemingly no one was exempt from fear. Being that the Red Scare and McCarthyism was prevalent, the FBI’s main concern was Communism. The FBI would stop at nothing to stop the spread of Communism on U.S. soil, even if it meant spying on the people of the United States.

With people like Malcolm X, the FBI collected a bevy of information: physical appearance, residence, employment, health records, and correspondence. The bureau’s investigation was conclusively thorough. Yet despite collecting this information, did it justify the measures took to collect it? Malcom X, via his letters to friends and family, confirmed he was a Communist. The man also identified with the Nation of Islam, a group that claims all non-Muslims will be destroyed in the “war of Armageddon”. The report emphasizes his Communist ties and has a hint of racial overtones in how it refers to the Nation of Islam. Knowing this, plus the fact that Malcolm had a criminal record of larceny, the FBI was right to be suspicious of him, but not because he was Communist or Muslim. The FBI ultimately allowed the anti-Communist and anti-Civil Rights sentiment of the era to corrupt and focus on a man for his affiliations, not on his actions. In hindsight, the FBI of 1953 was not wrong. Yet, their intention was to focus on people who could threaten the national security of the U.S. Knowing that Malcolm was a Communist with a criminal record who could threaten the American lifestyle, the FBI was right to investigate him, yet it should have been done with the focus on the man and his actions, not his connections.

This look into how Malcolm X was characterized by the FBI reveals the struggles of intelligence organizations. The world can be a dim place, and in the vastly connected yet private world that we live in today, it can be even more difficult than it was in 1953 to find out who a person is. Modern intelligence operations must remind themselves that one’s words or appearance does not ensure their allegiance. By ensuring this fact, modern intelligence operations will not only have their intelligence, but will be able to extract wisdom from it.